The Turnaround Challenge

Why America's best opportunity to dramatically improve student achievement lies in our worst-performing schools

School Turnaround: a dramatic and comprehensive intervention in a low-performing school that produces significant gains in student achievement within two academic years.

Mass Insight
Education & Research Institute

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Despite steadily increasing urgency about the nation's lowest-performing schools – those in the bottom five percent – efforts to turn these schools around have largely failed. Marginal change has led to marginal (or no) improvement. These schools, the systems supporting them, and our management of the change process require fundamental rethinking, not incremental change.

What does successful school turnaround entail?

- **Recognition of the challenge.** Turnaround is a different and far more difficult undertaking than school improvement. It should be viewed within education, as it is in other sectors, as a distinct professional discipline that requires specialized experience, training, and support.

- **Dramatic, fundamental change.** Turnaround requires transformation. Schools that effectively serve high-poverty, highly-diverse student enrollments similar to those that typically attend our lowest-performing schools tend to operate very differently from traditional models.

- **Urgency.** Turnaround should produce significant achievement gains within two years, while readying the school for subsequent maturation into a high-performance organization.

- **Supportive operating conditions.** Turnaround leaders must be empowered to make decisions regarding staff, schedule, budget, and program based on mission, strategy, and data.

- **New-model, high-capacity partners.** Turnaround demands skillful change management at the ground level. States, districts, and foundations must develop a new resource base of external, lead turnaround partners to integrate multiple services in support of clusters of turnaround schools.

- **New state and district structures.** Turnaround requires innovation from policymakers at all levels. States and districts should create special turnaround offices that – like turnaround schools themselves – have the flexible set of operating rules and the resources necessary to carry out their mission.

This Executive Summary provides an overview of The Turnaround Challenge, a much larger report produced by the Boston-based Mass Insight Education & Research Institute, in conjunction with a broad range of national partners. The report is the first element of a multi-phase project funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. For more information and access to the full report, go to www.massinsight.org.

1. The Problem – and the Vision

THE PROBLEM

Five percent or 5,000 of America's one hundred thousand public schools, representing more than 2,500,000 students, are on track to fall into the most extreme federal designation for failure by 2009-10.

Many more schools will be placed in less extreme categories; in some states, the percentage will significantly exceed 50%. But a good portion of these schools will be so designated because of lagging gains in one or more student subgroups, under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. These schools face challenges that may be solved by fairly modest forms of assistance.

But the 1,100 schools already in Restructuring – the most extreme designation – as well as those likely soon to reach it represent a level of persistent failure that commands swift, dramatic intervention.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Turning around the "bottom five" percent of schools is the crucible of education reform. They represent our greatest, clearest need – and therefore a great opportunity to bring about fundamental change.

Why Schools Fail

These schools fail because the challenges they face are substantial; because they themselves are dysfunctional; and because the system of which they are a part is not responsive to the needs of the high-poverty student populations they tend to serve.

The school model our society provides to urban, high-poverty, highly diverse student populations facing 21st-century skill expectations is largely the same as that used throughout American public education, a model unchanged from its origins in the early 20th century. This highly challenged student demographic requires something significantly different – particularly at the high school level.

Turnaround: A New Response

Standards, testing, and accountability enable us, for the first time, to identify with conviction our most chronically under-performing schools. *Turnaround* is the emerging response to an entirely new dynamic in public education: the threat of closure for underperformance.

Dramatic change requires urgency and an atmosphere of crisis. The indefensibly poor performance records at these schools – compared to achievement outcomes at model schools serving serving similar student populations (see The Benchmark, next page) – should ignite exactly the public, policymaker, and professional outrage needed to justify dramatic action. If status-quo thinking continues to shield the dysfunctions that afflict *these* schools, there can be little hope for truly substantial reform throughout the system. Turnaround schools, in other words, represent both our greatest challenge – and an opportunity for significant, enduring change that we cannot afford to pass up.

How High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools Do It: The HPHP Readiness Model

readiness to LEARN

1. Safety, Discipline & Engagement
Students feel secure and inspired to learn

2. Action against Adversity
Schools directly address their students' poverty-driven deficits

3. Close Student-Adult Relationships
Students have positive and enduring mentor/teacher relationships

readiness to TEACH

4. Shared Responsibility for Achievement
Staff feel deep accountability and a missionary zeal for student achievement

5. Personalization of Instruction
Individualized teaching based on diagnostic assessment and adjustable time on task

6. Professional Teaching Culture
Continuous improvement through collaboration and job-embedded learning

readiness to ACT

7. Resource Authority
School leaders can make mission-driven decisions regarding people, time, money & program

8. Resource Ingenuity
Leaders are adept at securing additional resources and leveraging partner relationships

9. Agility in the Face of Turbulence
Leaders, teachers, and systems are flexible and inventive in responding to constant unrest

The Benchmark

A small but growing number of high-performing, high-poverty (HPHP) schools are demonstrating that different approaches can bring highly challenged student populations to high achievement.

How do they do it? Extensive analysis of HPHP school practice and effective schools research revealed nine strategies that turn the daily turbulence and challenges of high-poverty settings into design factors that increase the effectiveness with which these schools promote learning and achievement. These strategies enable the schools to acknowledge and foster students' *Readiness to Learn*, enhance and focus staff's *Readiness to Teach*, and expand teachers' and administrators' *Readiness to Act* in dramatically different ways than more traditional schools. This dynamic "HPHP Readiness Model" is represented in the graphic above.

A "New-World" Approach

As understanding of these Readiness elements grows, it becomes clear that HPHP schools are not making the traditional model of education work better; they are reinventing what schools do. We call this "New-World" schooling, in contrast to the "Old-World" model – a linear, curriculum-driven "conveyor belt" that students and schools try (with little success in high-poverty settings) to keep up with.

The New-World model evokes instead the sense of a medical team rallying to each student, backed by a whole system of skilled professionals, processes, and technologies organized and ready to analyze, diagnose, and serve the goal of learning. The converging arrows symbolizing this "New-World" model of education lie at the center of the Readiness Triangle. What happens in classrooms between teacher and student is the most critical moment in the delivery of the education service. But the quality of that moment depends entirely on the readiness of the system and the people who are part of it to teach, learn, and act effectively and in accordance with the mission.

For more information on the magnitude and nature of the turnaround challenge, see Part 1 of the full report, available at www.massinsight.org. For more on the strategies and lessons offered by high-performing, high-poverty schools, see Part 2 and the Supplemental Report (also available at that website).

2. The Challenge of Change

WHAT'S BEEN TRIED

The research on turnaround of failing schools reveals some scattered, individual successes, but very little enduring progress at scale.

Most schools in Restructuring (the federal designation for chronic under-performance) are like organisms that have built immunities, over years of attempted intervention, to the "medicine" of incremental reform. Low-expectation culture, reform-fatigued faculty, high-percentage staff turnover, inadequate leadership, and insufficient authority for fundamental change all contribute to a general lack of success, nationally, in turning failing schools around and the near-total lack of success in conducting successful turnaround at scale.

Turnaround vs. "School Improvement"

Most of what's applied to under-performing schools today represents an incremental-change effort or an incomplete attempt at wholesale change.

"Light-touch" efforts that redirect curriculum or provide leadership coaching may help some average-performing schools improve, but they are clearly not sufficient to produce successful turnaround of chronically poor-performing schools. This is not surprising, given that high-performing, high-poverty (HPHP) schools have evolved such fundamentally different strategies to achieve success, and that turnaround initiatives need additionally to break through existing inertia.

Turnaround, as we are defining it here, is different from *school improvement* because it focuses on the most consistently under-performing schools and involves dramatic, transformative change. Change that, in fact, is propelled by imperative: the school must improve or it will be redefined or closed.

The Inadequate Response to Date

Our collective theory of change has been timid, compared to the nature and magnitude of the need. Most reform efforts focus on *program change* and limit themselves to *providing help*. Some also allow for *changing people*. A very few also focus on *changing conditions and incentives*, especially the degree of leadership authority over staff, time, and money.

Analysis of school intervention efforts to date confirms that they are generally marked by:

▶ **Inadequate design**: lack of ambition, comprehensiveness, integration, and networking support

▶ **Inadequate capacity**: fragmented training initiatives, instead of an all-encompassing people strategy and strong, integrated partnerships that support the mission

▶ **Inadequate incentive change**: driven more by compliance than buy-in

▶ **Inadequate political will**: episodic and sometimes confusing policy design; under-funding; and inconsistent political support

Focusing on program reform is safe. It produces little of the controversy that the more systemic reforms (human resource management, governance, budget control) can spark. NCLB, despite its intended objectives, has effectively endorsed and supported risk-averse turnaround strategies through its open-ended fifth option for schools entering Restructuring. The net result: little track record nationally – and that mostly at the district level, not the state – in comprehensive, system-focused, condition-changing turnaround.

The full report and the supplement provide detailed analysis of the most prevalent intervention strategies, and profiles of efforts underway in ten states and four major districts.

## What Success Requires: A "Zone" for Effective Turnaround

States and districts can engineer more effective turnaround at scale by creating space that supports *outside-the-system* approaches, focused *inside* the system.

The high-performing, high-poverty schools we studied tend to reflect characteristics of highly entrepreneurial organizations. That makes sense. These schools are succeeding either by working outside of traditional public education structures (charters); or by working around those structures, internally (in-district charter-likes); or by operating exceptionally well against the system – with emphasis on *exceptionally*. Lessons from these schools indicate a need for the following elements in any school turnaround effort – all of which reflect characteristics that are not norms, broadly speaking, of traditional inside-the-system public schooling:

▸ **Clearly defined authority to act** based on what's best for children and learning – i.e., flexibility and control over staffing, scheduling, budget, and curriculum

▸ **Relentless focus on hiring and staff development** as part of an overall "people strategy" to ensure the best possible teaching force

▸ **Highly capable, distributed school leadership** – i.e., not simply the principal, but an effective leadership team

▸ **Additional time** in the school day and across the school year

▸ **Performance-based behavioral expectations** for all stakeholders including teachers, students, and (often) parents

▸ **Integrated, research-based programs and related social services** that are specifically designed, personalized, and adjusted to address students' academic and related psycho-social needs

A handful of major school districts – Chicago, Miami-Dade, New York City, Philadelphia – are experimenting with *turnaround zones* in an effort to establish protected space for these kinds of approaches. (See graphic at right.) The opportunity for states is to create this kind of protected space for turnarounds on behalf of all school districts.

Applying *Outside*-the-System Approaches, Focused *Inside* the System
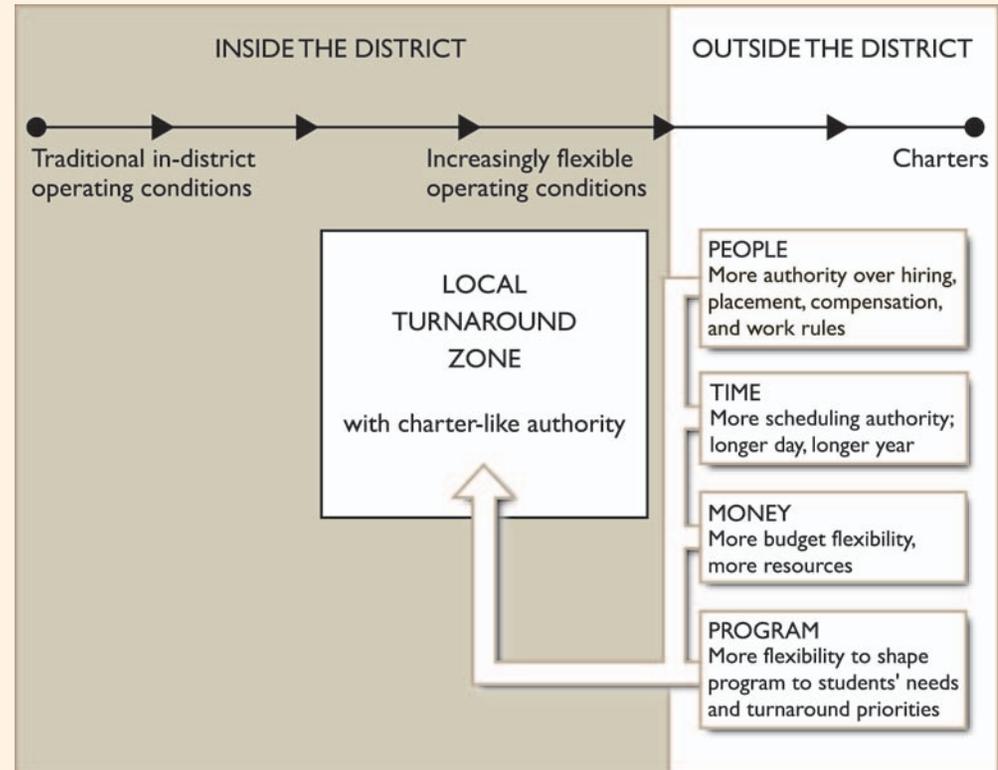
Building the Turnaround Model:

In order to enable school-level reform that incorporates the three "readiness" dimensions of high-performing, high-poverty schools, turnaround zones must be created – either within or across school district lines – that change traditional operating conditions that inhibit reform. The zones establish outside-the-system authorities inside the system, within a framework of strong support and guidance from the district and a lead turnaround partner.
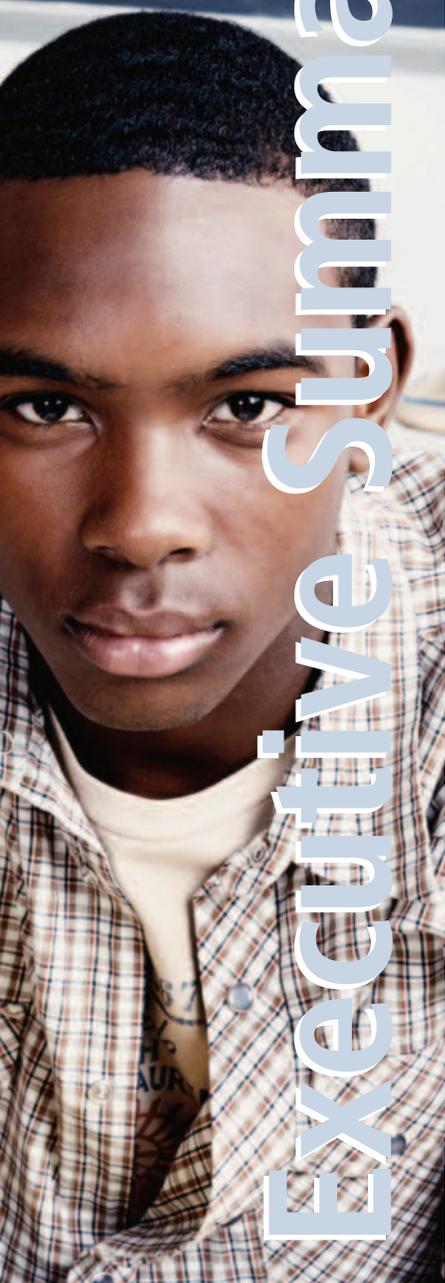
3. The Way Forward

A CALL TO ACTION FOR STATES

Effective turnaround at scale calls for bold, comprehensive action from the state, working together with districts and outside partners.

State governments must take strong action – even in strong local-control states. They must act in concert with districts and outside providers. With rare exceptions, schools and districts – essentially risk-averse, conservative cultures – will not undertake the dramatic changes required for successful turnaround on their own. But while states may have the responsibility to ensure equitable intervention across district lines, they clearly do not have the capacity to implement turnaround on the ground at the scale of the need. Their role is to require fundamental, not incremental change; establish operating conditions that support, rather than undermine, the desired changes; add new capacity in high-leverage school and district roles and establish turnaround partners; and galvanize local capacity where it is currently trapped in dysfunctional settings.

The Three 'C's of Turnaround at Scale

Our research suggests that a coherent, comprehensive state turnaround initiative would incorporate three key elements: Changing Conditions, Building Capacity, and Clustering for Support.

Changing Conditions

Turnaround requires protected space that dismantles common barriers to reform. Chronically under-performing schools offer a politically defensible opportunity to create such a space. A few entrepreneurial school districts (Chicago, Miami-Dade, New York) have created such condition-changing zones or "carve-outs" for their neediest schools. But others (Philadelphia, Oakland) have needed intervention from the state to mount similar initiatives.

States should pass regulations (as Massachusetts has) or legislation (as Maryland has) that produce sufficient leverage for all district leaders to create the protected space they need for turnaround to be effective. The best regulations *change the incentives* for local stakeholders, motivating the development of turnaround zones in order to gain their advantages – while avoiding "final option" alternatives that would diminish district and union control.

The condition changes needed for turnaround zones can be controversial. But turnaround leaders clearly must have the authority to *act*. That means a collaborative revision of many contractual requirements in districts with unions. Districts, working with turnaround partners and the state, must be able to install new principals if needed; principals must in turn have control over who is working in their buildings, along with the allocation of money, time, and programming (including curriculum and partnerships with social services). Schools must be freed to take on professional norms, including differentiated roles for teachers and differentiated compensation. Decision-making must be freed so that it revolves around the needs of children, not adults. At the same time, each turnaround school cannot be expected to design and manage its own change process; its latitude for decision-making lies within a framework of strong network support and turnaround design parameters established by the state, and carried out by districts and/or turnaround partners.

Building Capacity

Organizational turnaround in non-education-related fields requires special expertise; school turnaround is no different. It is a two-stage process that calls for fundamental transformation at the start, managed by educators with the necessary training and disposition, with steady, capacity-building improvement to follow. Neither schools and districts, nor states, nor third-party providers have sufficient capacity at present to undertake successful turnaround at scale. Building that capacity for effective turnaround – both inside of schools and among outside partners –

must be the state's responsibility, as school districts lack the means and expertise to do so on their own. Moreover: turnaround represents an opportunity to redesign the ways schools work with outside partners. The fragmentation that characterizes current school/provider relationships needs to be replaced by an integrated approach that aligns outside support around the turnaround plan, organized by a single "systems integrator" partner.

Clustering for Support
Turnaround has meaningful impact at the level of the school building, but turnaround at scale cannot be accomplished in ones and twos. States and districts should undertake turnaround in clusters organized around identified needs: by school type (e.g., middle schools or grade 6-12 academies), student characteristics (very high ELL percentages), feeder patterns (elementary to middle to high school), or region. Clusters should be small enough to operate effectively as networks, but large enough to be an enterprise – i.e., to provide valuable, efficient support from the network center.

The Political Realities: Enabling the State Role
Turnaround of failing local schools has no natural constituency. Coalitions of support must instead be built at two levels – statewide and community-wide. To ensure sustained and sufficient statewide commitment to turnaround reforms and investments, *someone* (governor, commissioner, business/community leader) or some agency must create an advocacy coalition of political, education, corporate, foundation, university, and nonprofit leaders. To ensure broad commitment to turnaround at the community level, states can blend the leverage of accountability-based sanctions (you risk losing authority over this school if you fail to act) with the "carrot" of resources and condition-change. Finally: to design and implement turnaround effectively, states must create an appropriate coordinating body or mechanism to lead the work, ideally as a public/private agency linked to the state department of education.

For more on the three 'C's and the state role, see Parts 3 and 4 of the full report, along with the proposed Framework in Part 5.

From Fragmented Improvement Projects to Integrated Turnaround Strategies

"Old World" Intervention Capacity & Roles
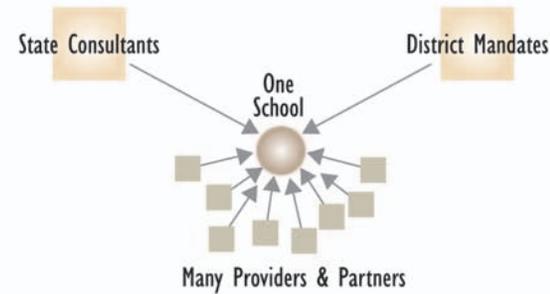
"New World" Comprehensive Turnaround Framework

12 Tough Questions
A Self-Audit for States Engaged in School Turnaround

Use this self-audit to measure the probable impact of your state's approach to school turnaround. A corollary tool for school principals charged with turnaround can be found in the full report.

Evaluating Your State's Commitment

1. Has your state visibly focused on its lowest-performing five percent of schools and set *specific, two-year turnaround goals,* such as bringing achievement at least to the current high-poverty school averages in the state?

2. Does your state have a plan in place that gives you confidence that it can deliver on these goals?

3. If not: Is there any evidence that the state is taking steps to accept its responsibility to ensure that students in the lowest-performing schools have access to the same quality of education found in high-performing, high-poverty schools?

Evaluating Your State's Strategy

4. Does your state recognize that a turnaround strategy for failing schools requires fundamental changes that are different from an incremental improvement strategy?

5. Has your state presented districts and schools with:

   - a sufficiently attractive set of turnaround services and policies, collected within a protected turnaround "zone," so that schools actively *want* to gain access to required new operating conditions, streamlined regulations, and resources; and

   - alternative consequences (such as chronically under-performing status and a change in school governance) that encourage schools and districts to volunteer?

6. Does your state provide the student information and data analysis systems schools need to assess learning and individualize teaching?

7. *Changing Conditions:* Does your state's turnaround strategy provide school-level leaders with sufficient streamlined authority over staff, schedule, budget and program to implement the turnaround plan? Does it provide for sufficient incentives in pay and working conditions to attract the best possible staff and encourage them to do their best work?

8. *Building Capacity – Internal:* Does your state recognize that turnaround success depends primarily on an effective "people strategy" that recruits, develops, and retains strong leadership teams and teachers?

9. *Building Capacity – External:* Does your state have a strategy to develop lead partner organizations with specific expertise needed to provide intensive school turnaround support?

10. *Clustering for Support:* Within the protected turnaround zones, does your state collaborate with districts to organize turnaround work into school clusters (by need, school type, region, or feeder pattern) that have a lead partner providing effective network support?

State Leadership and Funding

11. Is there a distinct and visible state entity that, like the schools in the turnaround zone, has the necessary flexibility to act, as well as the required authority, resources, and accountability to lead the turnaround effort?

12. To the extent that your state is funding the turnaround strategy, is that commitment a) adequate and b) at the school level, contingent on fulfilling requirements for participation in the turnaround zone?